

CARL SANDBURG AND MAXWELL BODENHEIM



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by O. W. Firkins

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“SMOKE and Steel,” less moving, because less human, than some of Mr. Sandburg's earlier work, is opportune for the critic, because the poet's mind or part of it defines itself with clearness in its pages. First, he is a stylist, but a stylist with an incapacity to hold his key for more than a few bars and—what is very curious—with a wilful mania for the disfigurement of style. That his verse is wrought verse—no mere sally of impulse, “Throw Roses,” may demonstrate: Throw roses on the sea where the dead went down. The roses speak to the sea, And the sea to the dead. Throw roses, O lovers— Let the leaves wash on the salt in the sun. This is very good in its studied way and its brevity is its preservative. Mr. Sandburg's elegance resembles the small boy's Sunday cleanliness, it vanishes while one turns around. The six lines of “Grieg Being Dead” accommodate two such mutually quarrelsome phrases as “care a hell's hoot” and “he dreams them at the doors of new stars.” Mr. Sandburg chips the nose from his own statue. Are not such incongruities in the world? They are indeed, and their presence in the world is the occasion for that recast or recension of the world that is known as literature. The next point about Mr. Sandburg is that his eye (not his mind) is clear. Let the following bear witness: “The farmboy whose face is the color of brick-dust, is calling the cows; he will form the letter X with crossed streams of milk from the teats; he will beat a tattoo on the bottom of a tin pail with X's of milk.” If only Mr. Sandburg would stop at his fact and stay by his fact! The trouble is that he insists on playing the

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Here are clear images. Here is the perception of an opportunity to feel, of a summons to feel; but the feeling itself is not present. Mr. Sandburg locates an emotion, actual or possible, and mistakes this for its capture. He leaves his card at the door in answer to the “Not at home,” and imagines that in leaving the card he has paid the visit. The situation is complicated by the fact that the exclusion is not universal, there are houses in which he sits by the firelog. The thinking, again, in Mr. Sandburg is very loose, loose even to the point of destroying the cohesion of the images. In “Smoke and Steel” he tells us that steel is made of smoke and blood. How can smoke, the lighter refuse of steel, be one of its constituents, and how can the smoke which drifts away from the chimney and the blood which flows in the steelmaker's veins be correlated in their relation to steel? “Regrets,” he says in a vaulting phrase, “fly kites in your eyes.” Aspirations might fly kites, but regrets, with their pensive looking back and leaning back toward the irrecoverable—do they fly kites? Mr. Sandburg will liken his love in the same paragraph to a yellowhammer, an early robin, a redbird, and a graybird. Why slight the titmouse and the oriole? Everything is vaguely like everything else, and you need only consent to be vague to have your range of comparisons indefinitely and inspiritingly widened. Let us guard against misconception. The images in Mr. Sandburg are usually substantial; it is the connections that are gossamer. The chariot may be a hazel-nut, but the traces are of the smallest spider's web. It is idle to ask Mr. Sandburg to explain. The world into which he leads us is loosed from the bondage to explanations. Let me close by comparing Mr. Sandburg dumb though moving his lips with Mr. Sandburg actually speaking. The river is gold under a sunset of Illinois. It is a molten gold someone pours and changes. A woman mixing a wedding cake of butter and eggs knows what the sunset is pouring on the river here. The river twists in a letter S. A gold Snow speaks to the Illinois sky.

The woman mixes her butter and eggs; she makes a cake. Mr. Sandburg merely says “Here is butter”

and “Here are eggs” (river and sky). “Make the cake yourself, if you can.” But hear him again in an instant of articulation: In a jeweler's shop I saw a man beating out thin strips of gold. I heard a woman laugh many years ago. Under a peach tree I saw petals scattered . torn strips of a bride's dress, I heard a woman laugh many years ago. When Mr. Maxwell Bodenheimer dedicates his “Advice” to “Minna whose smile is my throne,” so obvious a bid for the favor of those whose favor is disgrace inclines one to throw down the book at once. Resist this impulse, and you may find yourself at the last page with a reluctant and recalcitrant respect for Mr. Bodenheimer. He does not write good verse, but he writes difficult verse conscientiously. He writes under a law, a stern law, and his own law, and failure itself on those terms is respectable. If a tyrant worked twelve hours a day and dressed in homespun, he would cease to be despicable even to republicans. This does not change my feeling that when Mr. Bodenheimer says to a street pavement Lacerated grey has bitten Into your shapeless humility, he not only writes verse so barbarously compressed that it writhes in its compression, but he is joining things whose junction is, and must be, purely typographical. Subject may be linked to predicate, as an engine is coupled to a train, but the engine can not pull the train. The combination is mentally impracticable. I am not sure that I have fathomed Mr. Bodenheimer's purpose, but my guess is that he is displeased with words for being verbal, and wishes to load them with the functions and prerogatives of things. The aim, or rather the tendency, is not vicious, but Mr. Bodenheimer chooses the wrong route. A man may in a measure rid himself of his own body, but only if he begins with the frank admission that its presence is necessary and its requirements inexorable. Similarly, a man may free himself, beyond a certain point, of the conventional element in language, provided he starts from the assumption that, on the hither side of that point, the convention is paramount and unescapable. Mr. Bodenheimer wants to be original in language long before the place for originality is reached. “Nature is commanded by obeying her,” and so is language; and if you begin by bullying either you will wreck your chance of domination.

MAXWELL BODENHEIMER

from *Modern American Poetry*

By Louis Untermeyer

Maxwell Bodenheimer was born at Natchez, Mississippi, May 26, 1892. His education, with the exception of grammar school training, was achieved under the guidance of the U. S. Army, in which Bodenheimer served a full enlistment of three years, beginning in 1910. For a while he studied law and art in Chicago, but his mind, fascinated by the new poetry, turned to literature. He wrote steadily for five years without having a single poem accepted. In 1918, his first volume appeared and even those who were puzzled or repelled by Bodenheimer's complex idiom were forced to recognize its intense individuality.

Minna and Myself (1918) reveals, first of all, this poet's extreme sensitivity to words. Words, under his hands, have unexpected growths; placid nouns and sober adjectives bear fantastic fruit. Sometimes he packs his metaphors so close that they become inextricably mixed. Sometimes he spins his fantasies so thin that the cord of coherence snaps and the poem frays into ragged and unpatterned ravellings. But, at his best, Bodenheimer is as clear-headed as he is colorful.

In *Advice* (1920), Bodenheimer's manner—and his mannerisms—are intensified. There is scarcely a phrase that is not tricked out with more ornaments and associations than it can bear; whole poems sink beneath the weight of their profuse decorations. Yet, in spite of his verbal exaggerations, this poetry achieves a keen if too ornate delicacy. In the realm of the whimsical-grotesque, Bodenheimer walks with a light and nimble footstep.

POET TO HIS LOVE

An old silver church in a forest
Is my love for you.
The trees around it

Are words that I have stolen from your heart.
An old silver bell, the last smile you gave,
Hangs at the top of my church.

It rings only when you come through the forest
And stand beside it.

And then, it has no need for ringing,
For your voice takes its place.

OLD AGE

In me is a little painted square
Bordered by old shops with gaudy awnings.

And before the shops sit smoking, open-bloused old men,
Drinking sunlight.

The old men are my thoughts;

And I come to them each evening, in a creaking cart,
And quietly unload supplies.

We fill slim pipes and chat
And inhale scents from pale flowers in the centre of the
square. . . . Strong men, tinkling women, and dripping, squealing
children Stroll past us, or into the shops.

They greet the shopkeepers and touch their hats or foreheads to me. . . .
Some evening I shall not return to my people.

DEATH

I shall walk down the road;
I shall turn and feel upon my feet

The kisses of Death, like scented rain.
For Death is a black slave with little silver birds

Perched in a sleeping wreath upon his head.
He will tell me, his voice like jewels

Dropped into a satin bag,
How he has tip-toed after me down the road,

His heart made a dark whirlpool with longing for me.
Then he will graze me with his hands,

And I shall be one of the sleeping, silver birds
Between the cold waves of his hair, as he tip-toes on.

MAXWELL BODENHEIM

The Bookman Anthology of Verse

edited by John Chipman Farrar

GROTESQUE, whimsical, satirical, Maxwell Bodenheimer grins through the mists of American poetry with a that occasionally approximates a leer. His tongue is often as sharp as his verses. Young, born in Mississippi in 1892, for three years an enlisted man in the army, and an uncompromising artist in his work, he writes and talks with no concessions to any mood but his own which is at all times that of crisp and penetrating wit. I have seen him at a meeting of "The Poetry Society of America" rising to criticize a poem, analyzing it with a dry tone and a slight lisp, while his words seemed to burn the very paper on which the poor verse was written. Yet he can also be brilliantly funny, with an impudence which seems calculated, but is in reality heart-felt. His mannerisms, both in writing and in life, are not posed. They are the man and the poet. In the midst of much that is sentimental in American writing, his carefully cerebrated, often exaggerated irony, proves an interesting antidote, and makes him one of our most distinctive poets.

NEGRO CRIMINAL

From the pensive treachery of my cell
I can hear your mournful yell.
Centuries of pain are pressed

Into one unconscious jest

As your scream disrobes your soul.
The silence of your iron hole

Is hot and stolid, like a guest
Weary of seeing men undressed.

The silence holds an unused bell
That will answer your lunging yell
When your flesh has curled away

Into the burning threshold of a day.

Like the silence, I listen

Because I seek the glisten

Of a hidden humour that strains
Underneath the stumble of all pains.
Brown and wildly clownish shape
Thrown into a cell for rape,

You contain the tortured laugh
Of a pilgrim-imbecile whose staff
Taps against a massive comedy.
Melodrama burlesques itself with free
And stony voice, and wears a row of masks
To hide the strident humour of its tasks.
Melodrama, you, and I,

We are merely tongues that try
To loosen an elusive dream
Into whisper, laugh, and scream.

MAXWELL BODENHEIM

By Witter Bynner

The Borzoi 1920: Being a Sort of Record of Five Years' of Publishing

While poets have been placed by the critics in this or that category and have lent themselves more or less to the indignity, Maxwell Bodenheimer has continued as he began, a poet of disturbing originality. Whether you like him or not, you cannot evade him. Let him once touch you and a perfume is upon you, pungent and yet faint, offensive and yet delicate, of the street and yet exotic. It is as if Pierian springs bubbled crystalline from the nearest sewer, forcing from you a puzzled and troubled enjoyment. It is as if a diamond leered or a rose exhaled sulphur or a humming-bird lanced your selfrespect. It is a drunken thief's hand, still deft, in the poetic treasury; nuances pouring Niagaran; sensibilities crowding in masquerade; madness mocking sanity; ideas dancing nude through confetti; a falsetto growl; a whispered song; a rainbow in the loose:— and yet, all the while a human eye watching the incredible kaleidoscope, an eye that sees and makes you see likewise, good and evil, beauty and pain, opposing and commingling their designs. Historically Bodenheimer's work is likely to share with Donald Evans' very different "Sonnets from the Patagonian" the distinction of having initiated in American poetry for better or worse the season and influence of fantastic impressionism. Evans has now become almost orthodox, his green orchid is put away; but Bodenheimer still wears in his lapel the coloured ghost of a butterflywing whose veinings mock at human progress.

THE INCURABLE MYSTIC ANSWERS WESTERN AMBITIONS

from *The Double Dealer*, 1922

By Maxwell Bodenheim

Western men,
Your life is a minor rhapsody

For flute and violin.
With sounds, now shrill, now suave,

You steal your hymns and frolics
From the surface dirt of realism

And the curves of sensuality.
Your feeble mysticism

Strains at the task of lifting tables
And placing naive retorts

Into the mouths of spirits,
Your erudition is the vain

Gesture of your repentance
Grown over-thin and complex.

Western men, you are beggars
Devouring bits of guile

Tossed from a violent mirage!
The contours of a rose

Bribing the quiet madness of evening
With cunning promises of red,

Are more important than your sweating love
And the rushing dreads of your market-places.

The contours of a rose
Will still arrange their subtle dream

When your clever schemes of mud
Win the drifting pension of dust.

Your charts and diagrams
Are merely a ragamuffin's initials

Cut into an ancient gate-way
That guards the invisible meaning of life.

THE CAMP-FOLLOWER

We spoke, the camp-follower and I. About us was a cold, pungent odor — Gun-powder, stale wine, wet earth, and the smell of thousands of men. She said it reminded her of the scent In the house of prostitutes she had lived in. About us were soldiers — hordes of scarlet women, stupidly, smilingly giving up their bodies To a putrid-lipped, chuckling lover — Death; While their mistress in tinsel whipped them on. . . . She spoke of a woman she had known in Odessa, Owner of a huge band of girls, Who had pocketed their earnings for years, Only to be used, swindled and killed by some nobleman. . . .

She said she thought of this grinning woman Whenever she saw an officer brought back from battle, dead. . . . And I sat beside her and wondered.

— Maxwell Bodenheim.

From *Poems of the Great War*
edited by John William Cunliffe

CALIFORNIA CITY LANDSCAPE

by Carl Sandburg
from *American Poetry 1922*

On a mountain-side the real estate agents
Put up signs marking the city lots to be sold there.
A man whose father and mother were Irish
Ran a goat farm half-way down the mountain;
He drove a covered wagon years ago,
Understood how to handle a rifle,
Shot grouse, buffalo, Indians, in a single year,
And now was raising goats around a shanty.
Down at the foot of the mountain
Two Japanese families had flower farms.
A man and woman were in rows of sweet peas
Picking the pink and white flowers
To put in baskets and take to the Los Angeles market.
They were clean as what they handled
There in the morning sun, the big people and the baby-faces.
Across the road, high on another mountain,
Stood a house saying, "I am it," a commanding house.
There was the home of a motion picture director
Famous for lavish whore-house interiors,
Clothes ransacked from the latest designs for women
In the combats of "male against female."
The mountain, the scenery, the layout of the landscape,

And the peace of the morning sun as it happened,

The miles of houses pocketed in the valley beyond—
It was all worth looking at, worth wondering about,
How long it might last, how young it might be.

CLARK STREET BRIDGE

by Carl Sandburg

Originally published in the anthology, *Chicago Poems* (1916).

DUST of the feet
And dust of the wheels,
Wagons and people going,
All day feet and wheels.

Now. . .
. . Only stars and mist
A lonely policeman,
Two cabaret dancers,
Stars and mist again,
No more feet or wheels,
No more dust and wagons.

Voices of dollars
And drops of blood

.
Voices of broken hearts,
. . Voices singing, singing,
. . Silver voices, singing,
Softer than the stars,
Softer than the mist.

PASSERS-BY

by Carl Sandburg

PASSERS-BY,
Out of your many faces
Flash memories to me
Now at the day end
Away from the sidewalks
Where your shoe soles traveled
And your voices rose and blent
To form the city's afternoon roar
Hindering an old silence.

Passers-by,
I remember lean ones among you,

Throats in the clutch of a hope,
Lips written over with strivings,
Mouths that kiss only for love.
Records of great wishes slept with,
Held long
And prayed and toiled for..

Yes,
Written on
Your mouths
And your throats
I read them
When you passed by.

FOG

by Carl Sandburg

THE FOG comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

SANDBURG, Carl,

The Encyclopedia Americana Edition of 1920.

American author: b. Galesburg, Ill., 6 Jan. 1878. In 1898-1902 he studied at Lombard College, Galesburg, and in 1910-12 was secretary to the mayor of Milwaukee, Wis. He became associate editor of System Magazine in 1913 and was also editorial writer on the Chicago Daily News. Mr. Sandburg was awarded the Levinson prize in the Poetry Magazine in 1914. He served in Company C, 6th Illinois Volunteers, in 1898 and saw active service in Porto Rico. In 1918 he was a member of the editorial board of the National Labor Defense Council.

CARL SANDBURG QUOTES

There are some people who can receive a truth by no other way than to have their understanding shocked and insulted.

In Reckless Ecstasy (1904)

Yesterday is done. Tomorrow never comes. Today is here. If you don't know what to do, sit still and listen. You may hear something. Nobody knows.

We may pull apart the petals of a rose or make chemical analysis of its perfume, but the mystic beauty

of its form and odor is still a secret, locked in to where we have no keys.
Incidentals (1904)

I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes.
"Prairie" (1918)

*Lay me on an anvil, O God.
Beat me and hammer me into a crowbar.
Let me pry loose old walls.
Let me lift and loosen old foundations.*
"Prayers of Steel" (1920)

*The Republic is a dream.
Nothing happens unless first a dream.*
....

*The name of an iron man goes round the world.
It takes a long time to forget an iron man.*
"Washington Monument by Night" in Slabs of the Sunburnt West (1922)

*Look out how you use proud words.
When you let proud words go, it is not easy to call them back.
They wear long boots, hard boots.*
"Primer Lessons" (1922)

source: https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Carl_Sandburg

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The Vision of this land : studies of Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg
by Hallwas, John E; Reader, Dennis J
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by Carl Sandburg
Publication date 1916

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Anthology of Magazine Verse for 1920: And Year Book of American Poetry
by Conrad Aiken, Djuna Barnes, Robert Frost , Amy Lowell, Edgar Lee Masters, Edna St . Vincent Millay, Edwin Arlington Robinson , Carl Sandburg, Edith Wharton

<https://archive.org/details/SkyscraperByCarlSandburg>

Skyscraper by Carl Sandburg
by Roy Trumbullon, uploaded January 7, 2012

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